

Book report

Fr. Piotr Dzedzej

Discarded Frocks. The Life Stories of Ex-Priests.

About the author

Father Piotr Dzedzej (born 1969, ordained 1994) is a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. He holds a master's degree in dogmatic theology from the Catholic University of Lublin. Now working as a curate in the Szczecin-Kamień Pomorski archdiocese, for three years he was also director of religious broadcasting at the diocese's Catholic radio station in Lipiany.

About the book

Basic facts

Defrocked priests have been a hot topic in Poland recently. This book contains twenty six anonymous interviews with ex-priests conducted by father Piotr Dzedzej. What transpires from these moving, often tragic stories is that it is difficult, at best, to lead a satisfying life after leaving the priesthood. The book is meant to draw attention to the position of ex-priests in society today, since it is longer possible to pretend that they do not exist.

Background information and main themes

Technically, there is no such as an "ex-priest." According to the Code of Canon Law, priesthood is a sacrament which binds forever. Therefore, on the one hand, laicized priests can still absolve from sins *in periculo mortis*, in the face of death, and, on the other, are scorned, mistrusted and hated, e.g. by parishioners fearing the violation of the Seal of the Confessional.

In Poland there have been quite a few cases of famous priests leaving the Church recently, which gave rise to discussions in various media, from sensation-seeking tabloids to respectable Catholic weeklies. The reasons, even if not explicitly given, seem to have been ideological rather than personal. Hence the question (which has not, incidentally, stirred an in-depth debate): is the Catholic Church in Poland undergoing a crisis?

Poland is a predominantly Catholic country, with over 90% of the population declaring themselves Roman Catholics. The Church is a respected public and political force, with acknowledged credit for the part it played in the downfall of communism. There is a huge devotion to the late Pope John II and an unprecedented hunger for his teaching. Father Dzedzej wisely capitalises on the latter, quoting the Pope's words on ex-priests in his foreword. He stresses the fact that His Holiness never condemned laicized priests and asked the community to embrace them. The book is intended to help to put the Pope's words into practice, so that priests are accepted and treated, along with their families, as any other citizens.

This, judging by most of the interviews, is still a long way off. While priests are generally respected while actively performing their duties, they are violently rejected, even by their own families, when they decide to leave the priesthood. The Church prefers not to be bothered by them, either: as one of them bitterly comments, "The ex-priest is supposed to be quiet and want nothing from the Church" (The Missionary, p. 29). The period of taking the weighty decision to discard the frock, which can take years, is generally a difficult and lonely time for the priests, who cannot count on understanding and support from any quarter. What comes up relatively often in these stories is the lack of a father figure: a reliable, mature

guide. The hardship is in many cases exacerbated by heavy drinking. Many ex-priests miss priesthood acutely and crave the Eucharist.

They are usually unequivocally blamed for leaving the priesthood. However, as Pope John II suggested, the blame often lays with the way young priests are formed. As one of them complains, in the seminary the stress was on the forms rather than “the heart of the matter.” They are not warned about the difficulties involved in celibacy. Entering the seminary as immature, inexperienced youngsters, they learn nothing about “real life” and are then supposed to cope with the reality they are utterly unprepared for.

There is also the broader question of evil within the Church – a taboo subject which has only recently begun to be broached – encompassing, among others, such vices as hypocrisy, cynicism, greed, materialism, jealousy, sexual harrassment and turning the blind eye. As father Dzedzej admits, “he did not mean to satisfy the curiosity of readers expecting piquant gossip about scandals in the Church, but no doubt readers so inclined will get their satisfaction.” He makes it clear, however, that he would like those spurred on by pure curiosity to end up being genuinely concerned. He himself refrains from judging both the individual choices of the interviewed ex-priests and the Roman Catholic Church in Poland as portrayed in their contributions.

Detailed summary

Foreword by the author

Part I

The Obedient son became a priest because his mother wanted it badly. Well aware that he had no vocation, he openly said so both to his parents and his teachers at the seminary, but nevertheless was pressed to go through with it. Unable to refuse, he took the holy orders – declared invalid later, since taken under duress – and worked as a priest for eight years, until his mother died. Now he is a doctor, married, a good parishioner (in a new community, under his wife’s name). He would like his story to serve as a warning.

The Dealer did not leave the priesthood voluntarily, but was excommunicated for a tax duty scam involving cars imported to Poland from Germany. He never lost his faith, even during his time in prison. He had worked in Germany for a country bed-and-breakfast for a while, before car-dealing caught up with him. He now manages a used cars salon and donates generously to charity.

The Missionary spent 21 years as a priest, mostly in Angola, and then in Brazil, where he was transferred to avoid malaria. He suffered a faith crisis as a result of causing the death of a 12-year-old boy in a car accident, and even contemplated suicide. He left the convent and, with the financial support of Dutch protestant monks, now lives in Brazil with his wife and son, earning a meagre living from teaching in a public school.

The Priest’s son was brought up to become a priest. Four years after ordination his dying mother confessed a secret she kept all her life: that he was the son of a priest. The death of his mother brought on a long depression. He recovered with the help of the love for the daughter of the atheist owners of the shop where he frequently bought alcohol. Called “traitor” by his former friends, he now serves his neighbours and God in a Polish Catholic church in America.

Part II

The Teacher of religion, a trained educator before taking the holy orders, with 5 years' experience as a teacher, decided to leave because of the enormous strain involved in teaching religion at school with neither the support nor the understanding of his superiors. He now runs a computer company, misses the consecrated life and still works with young people – on his own terms, offering them free computer courses, planning to establish a fund that would help youth in need.

The Innocent, a handsome man, became headmaster of a school at a very early stage of his career and was accused of seducing one of the teachers. Unable to clear himself of the accusations, he decided to leave the priesthood and begin afresh. Married to a woman he met through a dating agency, he teaches English for a living and is sometimes shocked by the differences between his previous and his present life, e.g. the fact that laymen have to prepare their own Christmas Eve dinner.

The Rebel didn't like the ways of the Church and often said so, and his departure was dramatic: he got on the plane to the US and shouted "You can all kiss my ass now!" as it took off. Having worked in the US for several years he wanted to be joined by a young daughter he had left behind and missed, but eventually returned to Poland, where he now lives with his daughter and her mother.

The Nervous Wreck literally couldn't take it any more and collapsed at the altar one day. Abandoned by his family and his superiors, he is a patient at a mental health clinic after a mental breakdown and lives at a shelter for the homeless. He feels closer to God now than ever before.

The Entrepreneur made preparations for his departure "in cold blood," as he puts it, for three years. His parents supported him, also financially. Today he runs a big tax office with 30 employees, and never turns back from other ex-priests. His bishop is very kind to him, afraid that he might disclose embarrassing details of the diocese's financial system if irritated.

God's Own was born after three still births and his mother promised she would give him to God if he should live. Even though he didn't like priests much as he grew up, he ended up becoming one. After twenty years' service he fell in love with a younger woman. Resisting at first, they succumbed to their passion and ventured to Rome to petition John Paul II in person that they may be married and he may still be priest. Married now, with three sons, he believes that celibacy should be discontinued, as a priest should be able to love both God and other people.

The Mayor, as a priest, devoted a lot of his time to his flock, and increasingly little to his own spiritual growth and individual prayer. He went through some hard times after he had left the priesthood and got married, but gradually earned his townspeople's respect and was elected mayor. He makes use of his past experience, which is no secret, in his office. He wants his tombstone to read "priest, teacher, mayor."

The Teacher, who entered a convent as a young man, found it both appealing and repulsive, comparing it to a duke's palace. There was little interest in spiritual or intellectual education of the young, only wealth and greed. He wanted to leave for a long time, but was delayed by

his own pride: he was the best. Having taught Latin and English for a while, he now lives in the country, bitterly regretting not having made a career.

The Perfect Seminarist, interviewed at a tv station before a show featuring ex-priests and ex-nuns, criticises the system harshly. Disillusioned already at the seminary, he went on to become a model priest, studied in Rome and then worked at a curia in Poland. The brilliant career ended abruptly when he dared to criticise his bishop. He decided to leave the Church and lead the life of a married man. He prays and worships daily, but is afraid to go to mass on Sundays to be pointed out as an ex-priest.

Part III

The Husband left the Church after 17 years' service. Feeling his emotional life shrinking, and thinking that loving all really meant loving no one, he decided to share his life with a woman.

The Butterfingers had a secret relationship with a nun, they were found out and had to resign from the consecrated life. They are married now and have a sheep farm which brings them money and prizes.

The Kid played at being a priest when he was little, parading around the house in mock-processions. His vision of priesthood was idealistic. When problems arose, he sought solutions in partying rather than prayer, and at one of the parties met his future wife. With no one to support him when he weighed the decision, he left the priesthood. He studied economics and is now a trustee in a big company. His son is a priest. He himself would return to priesthood immediately, if it was possible.

The Sportsman liked basketball, boxing and serving during mass in equal measure when young. His superiors and fellow curates, amazed at his positive approach and lack of complaints, did everything to discourage him and undermine his morale. He eventually left the priesthood and tried his hand at a number of jobs and had several relationships with women. 70 years old now, he has a wife who is thirty years his junior and an 8-year-old son about to celebrate his First Communion.

The Pensioner, over 70 today, had an accident and there was no one to look after him but a family of parishioners with a daughter, whom he made pregnant. He left the Church after three years' deliberation and is not sorry.

The Most Famous Krakow Citizen of the Year worked with drug-addicted adolescents as a priest, was respected and famous, even hailed as a saint. He was too proud to admit that he, too, had weaknesses: he fell in love with a girl. When she became pregnant, he had to choose between his love for the Church and the woman and the baby. He chose the latter, believing, however, that in the eyes of God, for whom all is possible, it is possible to have a vocation for priesthood and marriage simultaneously.

The A Bit of a Policeman had a calling, but the feelings for his future wife and daughter predominated after a few years' hesitation. He and his wife remember their shortcomings despite their happiness, but take heart from the Biblical story of David and Bathsheba, who also betrayed in order to be together.

The Taxi-Driver fell in love with a beautiful 19-year-old, a runner-up for the Miss Poland contest, and left the priesthood when their daughter was born. As a taxi-driver he talks to his passengers and tries to direct them toward faith. He never charges the poor for a ride.

The Scandalist, having worked as a priest for over sixteen years, moved a block away to live with a woman who had been in love with him for years and was there for him when he needed to talk to someone about his alcoholism. Today he no longer drinks and goes to church regularly with his wife, glad not to be turned away as one who caused a scandal.

Part IV

The Loser became a priest although he had no calling: his family would not let him give it up. In an aftermath of an affair with a married woman he left the priesthood and went on to set up a number of business which didn't prosper and was eventually turned away by his partner. He does not work now, relying on his present partner for upkeep and the daily pack of cigarettes.

The Homeless always desired to be a priest, but was a slow learner and it took him longer than his peers. Overjoyed when he achieved his dream, he quickly found out that he reacted badly to alcohol. Ashamed and unaware that alcoholism was a disease, he was finally sent to therapy by his bishop, but left with no support when it ended. He left the priesthood, underwent another course of therapy and formed relationships with women, but alcohol reduced him to beggary and homelessness. He was found dead near the church where he used to celebrate mass.

The Homosexual was convinced he was born to be a priest, as he was never sexually attracted to women. Sent with the Polish mission to Iraq, he woke up one morning with an officer by his side. He asked for a transfer and his wish was granted, but events unfolded according to that scenario everywhere he went. Back in Poland, he informed his bishop about his homosexuality and lived with his mother while waiting to be posted again. Worn out by the endless indecision, he moved to a bartender friend's. He had to leave because of being unfaithful; he lost his job because of alcohol. He is now waiting to die (he has AIDS).

Part V

The Priest, now 93 years old, was forced to take early retirement in the 1970s by a bishop after he disobeyed his order to get rid of the mercedes, then an indecently ostentatious symbol of wealth in a poor country. Lost, lonely and longing to be accepted, he fell in love with a woman at 63 and got married (the whole affair turned out to have been orchestrated by the communist special services). After a long period of repentance (15 years), he can finally celebrate mass again, which gives him such joy that he tapes himself every day, reliving the experience several times before the next morning.

Appendix

The appendix, "The situation of the defrocked priest according to the Code of Canon Law," contains the essential information summed up in the colloquial expression "once a priest, always a priest," and the explanation of the terms suspension and dispensation, as well as the procedures involved.